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Weapons and Warfare

History and Hardware of Warfare

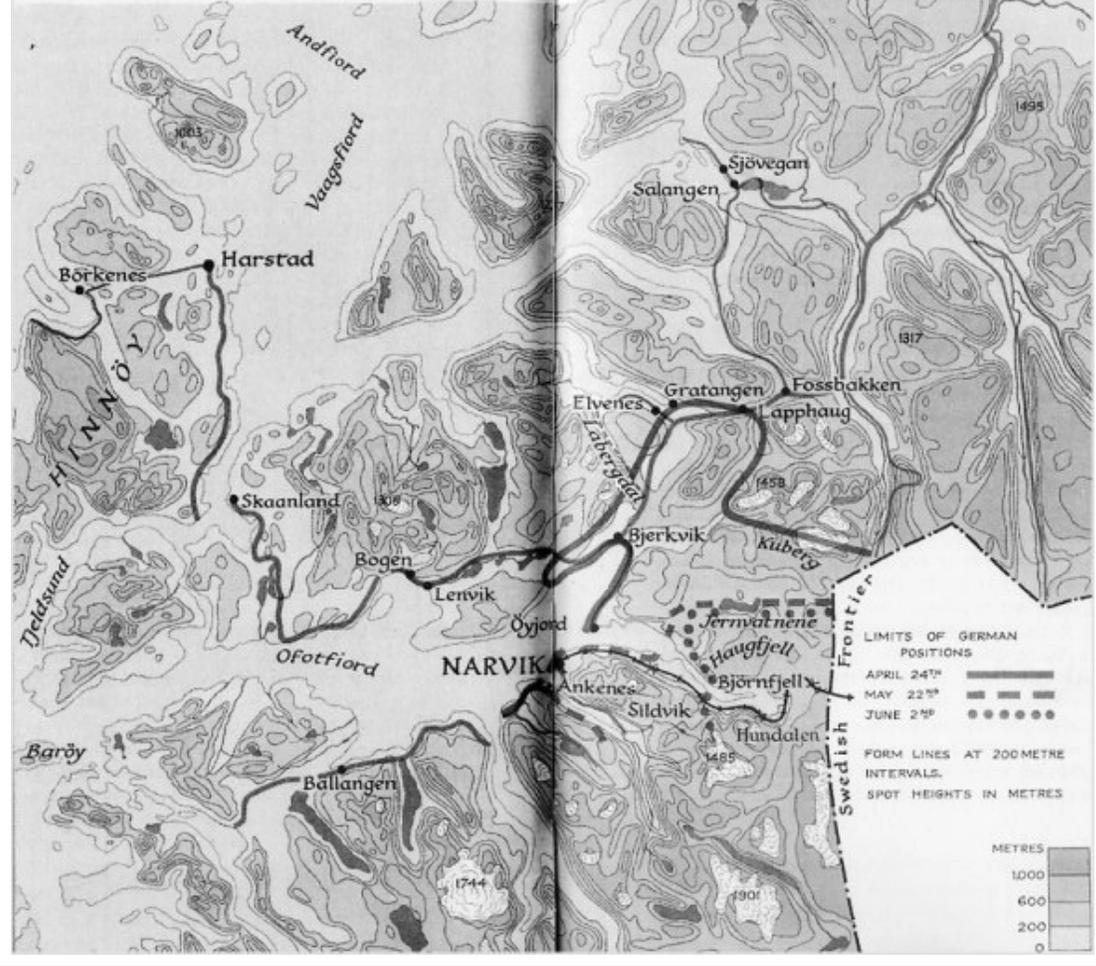
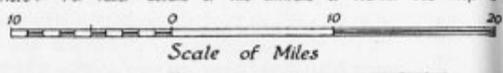
German 2nd Mountain Division at Narvik

Part II

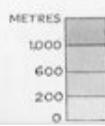
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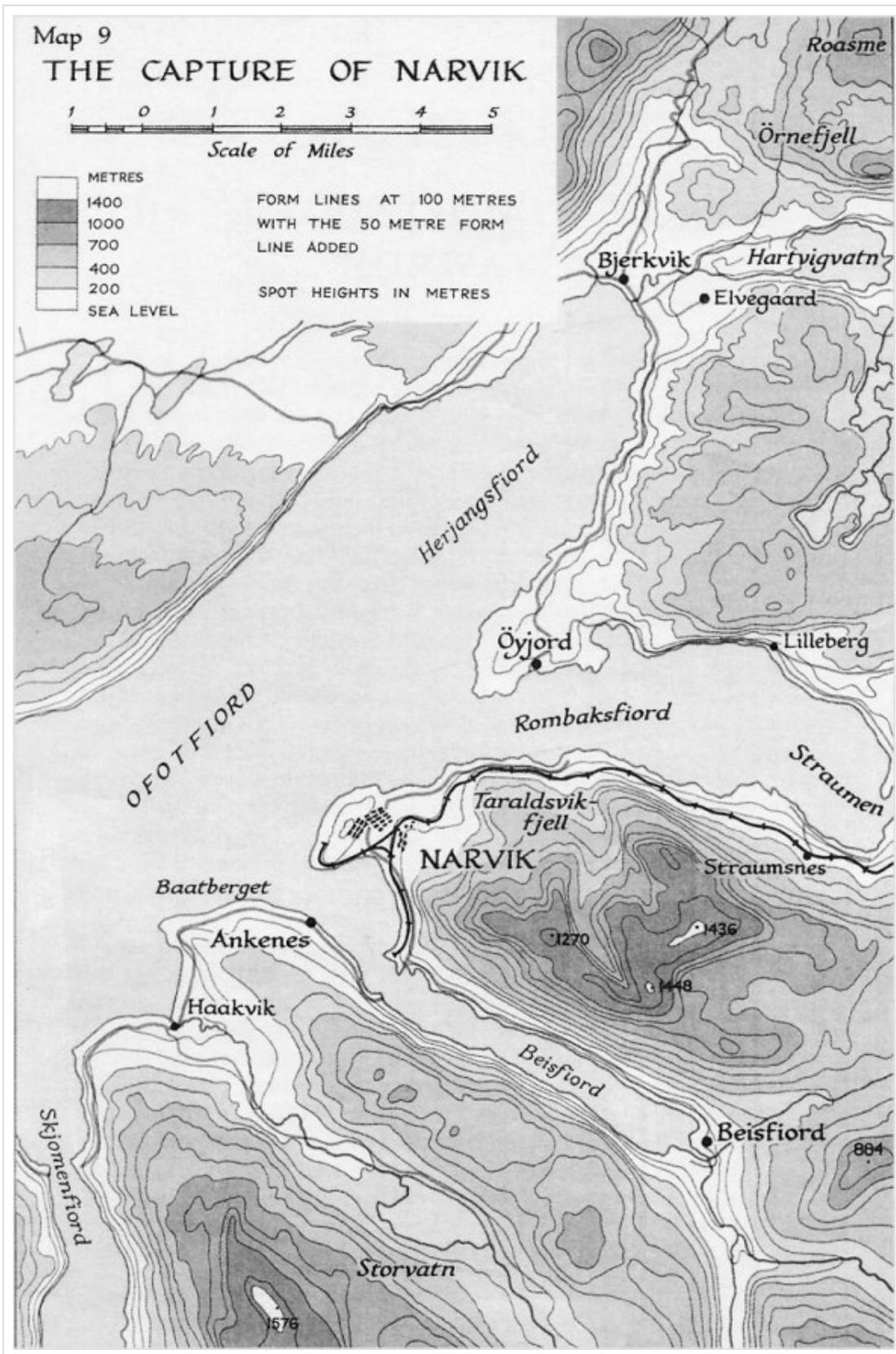
Map 10
THE APPROACHES TO NARVIK

Note:- For fuller details of the environs of Narvik see map 9



LIMITS OF GERMAN POSITIONS
 APRIL 24th —————
 MAY 22nd - - - - -
 JUNE 2nd
 FORM LINES AT 200 METRE INTERVALS.
 SPOT HEIGHTS IN METRES





Operation Wildente (Wild Duck)

While Feurstein's initial advance was rapid, Group XXI had noted with concern that resistance had stiffened on April 7 and that it took Feurstein's forces four days to cover the remaining 40 kilometers to Mosjøen. This was too slow for von Falkenhorst, who

was well aware of Dietl's desperate situation. Group XXI also worried about reported Allied landings along the coast.

A daring, small-scale amphibious operation, which won the admiration and respect of both British and Norwegians, was undertaken to regain the speed of the northward advance. The operation involved Co 1 from the 138th Regiment, a reinforced mortar platoon from Co 4 of the same regiment, two mountain howitzers from the 112th Mountain Artillery Regiment (part of the 3rd Division), and two 20mm anti-aircraft guns. The task force numbered about 300 troops and Captain Holzinger was in command. The Germans commandeered a 1,000-ton Norwegian coastal steamer, Nord-Norge, and replaced its crew with naval personnel under the command of Lieutenant Vogelsang. One gun and a couple of machineguns were mounted on the steamer. The Germans began their hazardous 500-kilometer journey through enemy-infested waters in the evening of May 9, escorted by German aircraft.

Holzinger's mission was to land his troops at Hemnesberg, about 20 kilometers southwest of Mo and 10 kilometers north of Elsfjord. He was then to seize the road junction at Finneid, and hold it against all attacks until the arrival of the lead elements of the 2nd Division, which would then mount its attack against Mo. It was hoped that any Norwegian or Allied forces south of Hemnesberg would be caught in a trap. The plan called for landing an additional 70 troops by seaplane near the town to assist the German landing.

The director of the shipping line to which Nord-Norge belonged warned the Norwegian military authorities as soon as the ship had departed. He did not know the ship's destination. This report was passed to the British. Another message, reporting the ship passing Rørvik, a coastal town a short distance south of the Nordland provincial boundary, escorted by two aircraft, reached the 3rd Sea Defense District in the morning of May 10. The report was forwarded immediately to the British naval headquarters in Harstad along with a request for the dispatch of naval units to capture or sink the ship. It was not until one hour and 40 minutes later that orders were given to the two nearest ships, the anti-aircraft cruiser Calcutta 50 miles west of Skomvær Lighthouse and the destroyer Zulu in Skjelfjord. Calcutta waited two hours for a second message that gave the transport's destination as Mo, before she set out to intercept. Finally, she waited for escort from the destroyer Zulu and that link-up did not take place until 1700 hours, 40 miles from the approach to Mo. The Germans were thus able to slip into the fjord unmolested before the British ships arrived.

The staff at the British headquarters in Harstad, as well as the Norwegians, were well aware of the dangers of German amphibious operations under air cover along the Nordland coastline. The Admiralty had suggested to Admiral Forbes that a destroyer flotilla be made available to patrol the coast from Namsos to Bodø but Admiral Cork notes that this was unfortunately not acted on.

Lieutenant Colonel Nummedal had ordered the reserve battalion of the 14th Inf to Mo to rest and reorganize. This unit arrived in Mo by sea on May 10 but it was in a state of disintegration and needed time before it could again become an effective combat unit.

The only other Norwegian forces in Mo on May 10 consisted of Co 2, 1/14th Inf and a security force from a training unit. Company 1, 1/14 and a company from the reserve battalion of the same regiment were at Korgen facing south and the 1/14th Inf was at Mosjøen. The Norwegian troops at Korgen and Mosjøen would have their line of retreat cut if the Germans seized Hemnesberg and cut the road to Mo. Also in Mo at the time of the German landing at Hemnesberg was Independent Co 1, commanded by Major May. It had a platoon at Hemnesberg.

Nord-Norge hoisted the German flag as it came within sight of Hemnesberg, where it docked at 1900 hours on May 10. However, the German attack had started shortly before then when two Do-26 seaplanes landed a small group of men from Co 7 of the 138th Regiment, commanded by Lieutenant Rudlof, at Sund, a short distance east of Hemnesberg. Another five seaplanes bringing in additional troops from Co 7, about 70 in all, followed shortly. The seven seaplanes made multiple trips to Hemnesøy, bringing in equipment and supplies.

There was a Norwegian squad-size security force in the Hemnesberg harbor area along with approximately 30-35 British troops from the 1st Independent Co. These forces opened fire on the Germans before the ship reached the pier. The mountain troops stormed ashore, covered by fire from the machineguns on the steamer, and they launched a full-scale attack on the small British/Norwegian force when German aircraft appeared overhead and dropped bombs. The fighting was sharp and at close quarters but the British and Norwegians were eventually driven out of the village, leaving most of their heavier equipment behind. Five Germans and eight British soldiers were killed and a larger number were wounded.

The Germans were meanwhile unloading their equipment, ammunition, and mountain howitzers from Nord-Norge. They also brought their own and British and Norwegian wounded aboard the ship. The two British warships, Calcutta and Zulu, appeared at 2015 hours and sank Nord-Norge with gunfire. Most of the German supplies were already unloaded but a number of wounded aboard perished when the ship sank.

The British and Norwegians who withdrew from Hemnesberg found the road blocked by the Germans who had landed by air. Holzinger and his troops linked up with the men from Co 7 during the night after some further fighting with the retreating British and Norwegian troops. These withdrew to the north side of the island and made their escape by boats. German losses had increased to eight killed.

A Danish officer, Tage Ellinger, who had seen service in Finland and volunteered for service in the Norwegian Army had made his way to North Norway and was given command of a company in the Mo area on May 10. The 120 troops in the company were all from the 14th Inf. This company was sent to Hemnesberg to take care of 14 Germans reported to have landed from a seaplane. The company crossed the isthmus to Hemnesøy in the evening of May 10. Major May decided to follow the Norwegians with his troops. They reached the peninsula south of Sund around 0300 hours on May 11.

The first Germans encountered and captured were three naval personnel. Ellinger and May learned from the prisoners that 400 Germans had landed, not 14 as originally reported. The prisoners also told their captors where the German troops were deployed and it was decided to try a surprise attack on the Germans in positions on the road to Sund. The Germans discovered their presence and the operation failed before there was any serious fighting.

Major May decided to withdraw his forces to protect the isthmus between Hemnesøy and Finneid. Ellinger's troops followed in the afternoon of May 11. The British and Norwegians quartered their troops in abandoned homes just north of Finneid, along the road to Mo. Ellinger took his company back to Hemnesøy on May 12, but they were forced to withdraw to the mainland during the night.

The 6th Division remained in the dark about developments in the southern part of Nordland Province. It had hoped for a tough delaying action south of Mosjøen but news indicated that the Germans had reached Mosjøen without meeting any resistance. It was obvious from all reports that the morale in the 1/14th Inf had reached a point where the unit was no longer fit for operations. Hovland blames Major Sundlo for his "miserable leadership."

While it can certainly be argued that a more effective commander could have produced better results, that same is true for other units in General Fleischer's command. As we have seen, some unusual demands were placed on this militia battalion. The unannounced withdrawal of the Allies from Namsos, the surrender of the 5th Brigade, the train accident, and the sudden British withdrawal from Mosjøen did much to break its morale. The northward withdrawal past the homes of many of its members, the men privately believing that the British could not, or did not intend to, halt the Germans, did not help.

Many of the leaders in the two battalions in Nordland were located outside the province. In many cases, these leaders were unable to join their units because of the nature of the German invasion. The Reserve Battalion, 14th Inf, for example, lacked a battalion commander and three company commanders. Fleischer was aware of this situation but he was unable to rectify it in any meaningful way. Nevertheless, the delaying actions by the 1/14th Inf slowed the German advance and it may have continued to do so except for Colonel Gubbins' sudden withdrawal from Mosjøen, leaving the Norwegians to make an exhaustive overland withdrawal.

General Fleischer obviously recognized the threat to his southern flank but he did not have many resources at his disposal to meet that threat. It was only through effective Allied action that the German advance could be stopped. Their actions were not only muddled and piecemeal, but lacked in resolve and overall strategy. However, as of May 15 Fleischer had not even bothered to meet with his Allied counterpart. Whatever the shortcomings in Major Sundlo's leadership abilities, the blame for the failure to stop Feurstein's forces cannot be placed on a single battalion commander.

When news arrived about the German amphibious operation at Hemnesberg and the British evacuation of Mosjøen, Fleischer concluded that the line of withdrawal for the two battalions of the 14th Inf was cut. He considered it imperative to recapture Hemnesberg in order to save these two battalions. A General Staff officer, Captain Ø. Dahl, was sent south on May 8 to become Nummedal's chief of staff. Dahl arrived in Mo in the morning of May 10 and discovered that the reserve battalion had already reached that town but was in a state of dissolution. Dahl reported the situation to the 6th Division on May 11. In answer to the division's desire to establish a defensive line in the Hemnesberg-Korgen area, Dahl answered that an additional 200 German troops had arrived on Hemnesøy by air and that it was not possible to recapture Hemnesberg with the available Norwegian troops. The recapture of Hemnesøy required British ground and naval support.

On the same day, General Ruge sent a sharply worded message to Admiral Cork, the gist of which is reported by General Sandvik:

The Commander-in-Chief pointed out that the German "bluff maneuver" at Hemnes and the resulting re-embarkation of the British companies at Mosjøen has not only changed the situation on our southern front but has broken the confidence in our allies among our troops in that area. In this regard, the destructive effects for the defense of South Norway of the unexpected earlier withdrawals from Åndalsnes and Namsos were pointed out ... The Commander-in-Chief stressed the need to re-establish the southern front. This was, in his view, possible with minor means and without complicating the situation in Narvik. He pointed out that there were, at the moment, more troops in the Narvik-Harstad area than could be used on the Narvik front.

Another message from Ruge to Cork, also on May 11, announced that his chief of operations, Lieutenant Colonel Roscher-Nielsen, had assumed command in Nordland Province. Ruge wrote "I hope you agree that in the prevailing crisis, there must be one commander there and that you will order the British troops to act in accordance with the orders issued by Colonel Roscher Nielsen." The British ignored this suggestion.

General Mackesy, who was also very concerned about developments in the south, decided to send the 1st Bn, Scots Guards to Mo. He also sent along a half-battery of 25-pounders, four anti-aircraft guns, and engineers. This force, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Trappes-Lomax, landed in Mo early on May 12. Mackesy viewed the defense of Mo as important since it was the terminal of the last road connection to Sweden and the airfield located just north of that town had to be kept out of German hands. Mackesy also prepared to reinforce the Scots Guards in Mo with the 1st Bn of the Irish Guards.

German Supply Problems

The Germans were having difficulties in supplying their forward units. Von Falkenhorst's order on May 4 had specified that the 2nd Mountain Division would pass through General Woytasch's 181st Division in the Grong area. The 181st Division would expand its area of responsibility northward behind the rearmost elements of

Feurstein's forces and assume responsibility for the movement of supplies in those areas. The north-south road was in terrible shape after the thaw set in and it was unsuitable for transport of supplies on a large scale before May 20. Until then, most supplies were brought in by air but the weather conditions made even this effort unpredictable. The capture of the British supplies in Mosjøen on May 11 alleviated the precarious supply situation for five to six days.

The Germans attempted unsuccessfully to bring supplies to the 2nd Division by sea. Their failure was attributable to Norwegian patrol boats operating from bases on the islands along the coast. This forced the Germans to undertake operations to secure the sea route by occupying a number of larger islands along the coast in order to prevent Norwegian patrol vessels from operating in the fjords and forcing them out to sea.

This mission was given to the 181st Division and carried out systematically during the rest of May and early June, assisted by a task force from the 2nd Mountain Division. Only small groups of Norwegian volunteers opposed them. Nevertheless, the last island was not captured until May 31. The route along the coast on the inland side of the islands was now open and the Germans began using this on a regular basis; but it was still necessary to plan a large-scale German naval operation for early June.



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